

Published in the Penn-Franklin News on 3/30/22.

Samuel Eliot Morison and Prince Henry

Two weeks ago and archived as usual at <https://www.murrysvillelibrary.org>, I promised a return to Samuel Eliot Morison: distinguished maritime historian, Professor at Harvard University where he taught for 40 years, and a United States Navy Admiral. He won Pulitzer Prizes for two books among his lifetime body of maritime histories. One was for "Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus" (1942), and the other was for "John Paul Jones: A Sailor's Biography" (1959). Morison was a giant. He brought Christopher Columbus and his time to life.

Christopher Columbus, with his brother Bartholomew, was a chart maker in Lisbon, a learned city of 15th century Europe and a foremost center for exploration and discovery. Portugal was a relatively progressive country for the time and the sea power of Europe. In about 1420 Prince Henry the Navigator founded a center for exploration at Sagres on Cape St. Vincent. Historian Henri Pirenne ("A History of Europe," V. II (1956)) claims that his motives were twofold: scientific curiosity and propagation of Christianity, but not mercantile. If that is to be believed, at least for these early days of exploration, the Portuguese, aside from any gold and spices subsequently valued, had what well may be by today's standards a research and development center. It was not organized as such, but acting as the NASA of its day.

The principal interest was exploration along and around the African coast, but there were other discoveries too. The seven islands of the Azores were "discovered" by Portuguese sailors beginning in 1431, and, along with the Madeira group "discovered" in 1419 and the Cape Verde Islands just prior to 1460, they were colonized.

The African coast was pursued in stepwise fashion, inching southward and around the Cape of Good Hope as technical advances with caravels and navigational instruments extended Portuguese seaworthiness. Bartholomew Diaz had rounded the Cape successfully by 1488, and Vasco da Gama reached India in 1498. Their names are well known today among the lesser known Portuguese mariners of the period.

A successor and nephew to Prince Henry (1394-1460), King John II, declined to fund a more adventurous project proposed by Christopher Columbus, namely to sail to the East by a westward route. This was happening just as Diaz returned with a glimmer of hope for the African route. Such is often the case that riskier but potentially more rewarding ventures, timed poorly, can be dismissed by cautious and perhaps otherwise preoccupied minds. This led eventually to Columbus gaining favor for his cause from Spain instead, which did not otherwise have a competitive state plan.

Exploration of the New World is a wonderful, real-life story, beginning with Prince Henry and told by Samuel Eliot Morison with all his expertise as historian, teacher, and Admiral of the U.S. Navy. As sailor himself, Morison sometimes makes interesting judgements about technical feasibility at sea. His diverse body of perspectives is not one that often converges in one individual, one who also happens to have the skill to write as both scholar and entertainer.

Published in the Penn-Franklin News on 3/30/22.

I cited some of his many works in the previous article. So, you have this unique opportunity now, with the James Webb space mission in progress, to travel in two different time dimensions at once. That is what great reads can be!

Charles B. Greenberg
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation